

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

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The China Caravans

2018 marks the 30th anniversary of the last of the nine China Caravans that were run between 1985 and 1988. Formally, these were known as the **Caravan America-China (CAC) Program** and they are recorded as Caravans C1 thru C9 in the annual WBCCI Membership Directory. For simplicity in this story, I will simply refer to them as the China Caravans. These were truly the last great “never been done before” adventures involving Airstream trailers and the WBCCI. Other than the Cape Town to Cairo and Around the World Caravans, no other Airstream caravan garnered more publicity than breaking down the Communist barrier to tour China in the 1980s. This was “big news” at the time and both the Chinese and American press toured with these caravans, leading to many magazine articles and TV news reports.

In the 1980s, China was a country of contrasts. The roads were rough and the villages very remote and primitive, yet the big cities were already modernizing. China Caravan participants saw people who had never seen a foreigner nor a travel trailer and rarely an automobile, and yet these same caravanners also danced in Chinese discos in its most modern cities. The China Caravans were as close as one could get in the 1980s to



the spirit of Wally’s 1959-60 African Caravan. What is amazing is that two couples from the African Caravan participated in China Caravans: #165 Oscar and Etta Payne were on China Caravan C1 and #2345 Alfred and Mildred Frosch were on China Caravan C6.

Thirty plus years later, the China those caravans saw exists no more. The world has become smaller as even the remote areas of China have been modernized and the Airstream Company now sells new Airstreams in China.

The backstory of the China caravans is that in 1982 a travel agency suggested a trip to China for WBCCI members, but without trailers. This piqued the interest of WBCCI Member #1208 Frank Sargent, who instead wanted to do such a trip in Airstream trailers. From mid-1982 thru mid-1987, Frank served as the Chairman of the WBCCI International Relations Standing Committee, the perfect place from which

to pursue such an idea. In fact, the China Caravans would not have occurred without the drive, determination, and imagination of Frank Sargent. Frank was the inventor of the Porta-Potti and founder of Thetford Corporation. He and wife Vivian were long time club members, having joined WBCCI in 1957, but organizing the China Caravans and



Official CAC Logo

then leading the first China Caravan in 1985 was their greatest achievement.

No doubt the China caravans were the most complicated caravans ever offered by WBCCI. While the Airstream Company had organized major overseas Airstream caravans several times between the first and last European Caravans in 1956 and 1977 respectively, including Africa in 1959-60 and Around the World in 1963-64, WBCCI caravans tended to concentrate on seeing the USA and Canada. WBCCI Overseas Caravans did not involve shipping Airstreams and tow vehicles over the oceans, instead relying on rented local RVs for each trip. Further, WBCCI’s Overseas Caravans benefited from local coordination and planning assistance by the International Caravanning Association.



Vivian & Frank Sargent

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The China Caravans were an entirely different undertaking. Nothing like them had ever been done before. Planning for the China Caravans took almost three years. A separate corporation, ChinaAdventures Corp., was set up to develop these caravans to keep the budget separate and protect WBCCI from liability. After long negotiations with Chinese officials, in early 1984 a go ahead was finally given to travel by trailer within the Fujian Province in southeast China. Frank Sargent then made a



China Caravan Rig in China

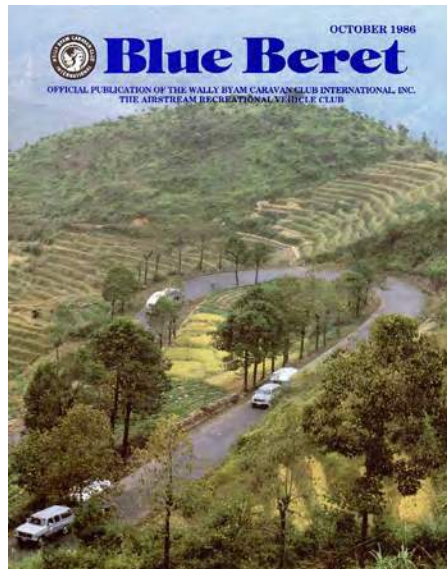
10-day scouting trip to China at his own expense to check out the road conditions and proposed camping sites. Initially, a series of 8 caravans between 1985 and 1987 were authorized by WBCCI and the Chinese government. Later a 9th caravan was approved that occurred in 1988.

These caravans utilized a new concept in which eleven identical Airstreams and tow vehicles would be shipped to China and be used and reused for each of the China Caravans, rather than each participant shipping their own Airstream and tow vehicle to China. The Airstreams and tow vehicles were left in China between caravans and were given to the Chinese government at the completion of the caravans. This was the lowest cost option as it avoided the necessity to pay a combined \$413,000 of import duty, China travel fees, and return shipping expense. The budget for this undertaking was huge as it had to cover the purchase, shipping, and insurance for Airstreams and tow vehicles as well as cover all other travel expenses. The total budget was over \$1,000,000 in 1980s dollars, coming from caravan fees plus a combined \$175,000 donated by WBCCI, Airstream, and General Motors Corporation to be used for publicity.

Airstream agreed to develop and build eleven custom 21' single axle "China Clipper" Airstreams for the trip that were smaller than the standard models it offered at the time. The small size was better suited for Chinese roads and the China Clippers were fitted with special water filters to allow drinking water to be obtained from "ditch water", if necessary. The Truck and Coach Division of General Motors provided eleven diesel GMC Suburbans for the trip, which avoided

the need to detune gasoline engines to cope with low quality Chinese gasoline.

Insurance for the Airstreams and tow vehicles had to be coordinated between Chinese and U.S. insurance companies, because coverage in China could not be handled by a company outside of China. Even getting Chinese Drivers' Licenses was a challenge as most caravanners exceeded the maximum allowed driving age in China!



China Caravan Cover Photo

Most WBCCI members may have first become aware of possible China Caravans when the President's Message in the April 1984 *Blue Beret* noted that Frank Sargent had been appointed as Chairman of a Special Committee to organize a China Overseas Caravan. The proposed China Caravans then got a one paragraph story in the May 1984 issue. A formal announcement and application form appeared in the June 1984 issue. Applications for the first eight China Car-

avans were accepted until October 31, 1984 and a \$300 deposit was required with the application form. All positions except those of the leader and doctor, were filled by lottery and a standby list was created for those not chosen in the lottery. Estimated costs were \$12,000 per couple for the first caravan, tapering down to \$10,000 for the fifth through eighth caravans, with any unused portion to be returned to the participants at the end. This price covered everything except food, fuel, and souvenirs. One of

the eleven rigs on each China Caravan was assigned to the English-speaking Chinese guide, leaving ten for WBCCI members.



Typical Road Scene in China

The first China Caravan was special. Its participants were actively engaged in promoting this endeavor. As a group, they participated in over 100 TV, radio, newspaper, and magazine interviews in the months leading up to the caravan. This caravan also included trailer travel within the United States. It began at Jackson Center on June 10, 1985 when the first group drove off in the new Suburbans pulling their China Clipper Airstreams headed for the 1985 International Rally in Lake Placid, NY, where they received much fanfare and publicity.



China Rigs at Lake Placid

Participants of China Caravans 2 thru 8 were invited to participate in the festivities at the International Rally and

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tour the new China Clipper Airstreams. The first China Caravan group left Lake Placid on July 5, 1985 bound for New York City, where on July 19th the trucks and trailers were put aboard ship for transportation to China. The caravanners were then on their own until September 1, 1985 when they reunited in Seattle for their flight to Hong Kong.

The overseas part of each China Caravan was similar, lasting about 41 days. They flew from Seattle to Hong Kong, had three segments within China, and then flew back from Hong Kong to Seattle. The first China segment included 3 days of shopping and sightseeing in Hong Kong.

Following that was about 3½ weeks and over 1000 miles of trailer travel within China. The first two China Caravans were restricted to trailer travel within the Fujian Province, but later China Caravans also visited the Guangdong Province. Roads that often clung to mountain sides as well as many flat tires and clogged fuel filters made this section of each caravan a real adventure. Attractions during this phase included rustic farms and villages with earth

walled houses, boat trips on scenic rivers, ancient Pagodas and Temples, a tea plantation, lacquerware and silk factories, and the beautiful Wuyi Mountain region, that was mostly unknown to Westerners.



China Rigs in China

In the third phase of each caravan, lasting about 10 days, the participants traveled by air and rail to other locations within China that could not be reached by trailer. Sights seen during this phase included the Great Wall of China and Forbidden City in Beijing and the Terra Cotta Army in Xian, China.

The first eight China Caravans ran in the spring and fall to try to take advantage of milder temperatures as follows (with estimated cost):

- C1 – September 1985 – \$12,000
- C2 – October 1985 – \$11,000
- C3 – April 1986 – \$10,500

C4 – May 1986 – \$10,500

C5 – September 1986 – \$10,000

C6 – October 1986 – \$10,000

C7 – April 1987 – \$10,000

C8 – May 1987 – \$10,000

In May 1986, it was announced that eight more China Caravans had been approved by the WBCCI Executive Committee and an application form was published in the Blue Beret. Perhaps due to the significant cost, only one additional China



Caravan C6 at the Great Wall of China (Left to Right: #23556 Nancy Roeser, #26625 Louise & Clifford Finley and #2345 Alfred & Mildred Frosch)

Caravan was run, bringing the total to nine. Very little is known about China Caravan C9 other than it ran in 1988 and records indicate there may have been as few as five couples on it. Whatever the number, they were the last China Caravan pioneers.

Of the 170 or so pioneering WBCCI members to participate in the nine China Caravans, only three remain WBCCI members in 2018:

- #51 Joseph Farley – Caravan C3
- #23556 Richard and Nancy Roeser – Caravan C6

Perhaps someday soon we can publish their stories.



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Sidebar:

Returning the Favor

Frank and Vivian Sargent also led Host Caravan H2 in 1987, otherwise known as **Caravan Goodwill America-China**. It was a chance for ten American families to host ten Chinese families during a four week long, 4000-mile caravan from Fort Myers, FL to the International Rally in Rapid City, SD. Because the Chinese did not drive, both members of each hosting couple had driving duties pulling their own Airstreams as well as those used by the Chinese families. This time Airstream provided 25' trailers for use by the Chinese and GMC again provided Suburbans. These trucks and trailers were sold to club members at the International Rally at the end of the caravan.